A New Imbalance

THERE IS ONLY ONE EXCEPTION TO THE FIRST LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

The CEO of a company called Teleport waved his arms, hands, and fingers across the inner surface of a holographic half sphere, his dominant tossed in a salad of haptic feedback frequencies finetuned by Big Touch to signal maximum information to a human recipient who can decode the vibrational meanings in fractions of a second thanks to corporate research's tireless enterprise to replicate the human nervous system in boolean. Today was the launch for an exciting new idea: instantaneous transport. The how involved temporary complete decomposition of an entire person and the why involved a tossed Caesar of small town dreams, small town unemployment, and the future. Hundreds of technopolis underdogs swarmed backstage like the impossible last level of a complex stealth game. Player one's ghost runner kept running into assistants who hoped he wouldn't be able to walk again after this, putting his time just seconds long of world best. "Break a leg out there!" These platitudes really pissed him off. The CEO didn't want to be a greeting card or just another talking head. His eyes set high on the leaderboard, position numero uno, world best. He secretly wished for his premiere performance to strike a homer even those outfielders in Silicon Valley couldn't catch. This was supposed to be it, the ultimate, pure and absolute. His debut, his magnum opus. Like many a naïve entrepreneur before him, he carried an ambition with him to perfect his first rather than leave behind a desperate trail of buried pet failures prior to making it big. He wanted to be the pony who only needed one trick, because his trick was the one to top 'em all. Teleportation was a pretty good bet if those were his

goals. His AFK avatar's eyes, animated in a looped idle cycle, sparkled with the silver lining that slipped in between the closed curtains leading out onto the big time. He was a hero archetype with his head in the clouds. He couldn't see clearly. He had to be told what to do. The only important headset and clipboard combo in the room reminded the timeless daydreamer about the clock. Five 'til. He breathed in curiosity, breathed out surrender. He decided to forget about schedules and social contracts and communication and respecting other people's time. Fuck plans. Why not just get on with it? He marched out prematurely in a businessman's runway strut, stiff like a soldier right on time with the beat, but the beat here was his own heart's drum of desire unbound by prior arrangements. The technical staff had to shift the keyframes they'd sequenced in rehearsal back by a few minutes so the projector could start on time but maybe all the intricate beats they'd chronographed in that map of theirs were gonna be thrown out anyway because the CEO was adlibbing his introduction and didn't look to have a copy of the script on his person as previously agreed upon. They guessed he decided to wing it as they trashed the automation file and listened to him umm his way through an explanation of what hundreds of engineers sacrificed years of their lives for. The prewritten talking points got crossed off randomly in his improvised flow, delivered out of order from the speaker notes, and this was all conversationally orated over a title screen that just read "Teleport: Teleportation is (Almost) Here." The next slide was left blank intentionally, but the CEO literally had no idea. He provided comedic relief on his feet, pacing side to side, impression of a hillbilly. "Where'd that one went?

'E musta teleported!" A panicked T-rex jog to the extreme camera right of the stage received a whispered pneumonic from an assistant then the executive poser went back to lax as he played it down all coolin' and tappin' his pointer against his noggin like durr, this old cranium, she does strange things sometimes. The CEO never quite kicked the schoolboy habit of feminizing his brain in his head. Such young habits can tend to die so old. They come back to haunt us. The CEO went through a period of a few months closely leading up to the grand reveal where he'd locked himself in the bathroom, just like life before puberty. Innocent days. Virginal days. He hadn't yet told a lie or played a part. He wasn't held responsible for much or accused guilty of anything. Play was not something you wrote. Now, he was a prolific pensman. The spectacle he wanted to kick things off with was a Tony award winning drama about a brother dynamic and fraternal themes. "I grew up around here, in the sticks. My family hunted our food during paycheckless weeks. Parents chose cable TV over health insurance so we buried a few along the way. I was one of the lucky ones. My neighbors were rednecks and they walked home from school barefoot with mud between their feet. Us gaptoothed kids were practically raised together and now, we're bonded for life, even though all my childhood friends died in their youth. What I'm about to do is dedicated to them, to honor the memory of those early investors with more money tucked in their chest than in their billfold. They always believed I could chin up my way out of the subsistence shoestring survival lifestyle my blood brought me into this world with. Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready to witness the first live act of teleportation in human history?" A resounding yes.

They were more than credulous to take that anecdote as actual even if the voice that recounted it was trained beyond trace of regional accent or warm human affect. The show began. Because the auditorium would never be able to accommodate the large scale machinery required to power the technology necessary in current implementations of teleportation, the CEO hired two identical twins to put makeup on and look like him so they could act the illusion of the CEO demonstrating teleportation. Not one ticketholder in the room that evening was fooled by the lie that was this stunt but they were still wowed because the guy who actually did it approved of the reenactment. "That was not a reenactment, folks. That was real life." And the crowd went wild. Now they were on their knees. Now his dick was out. It didn't matter how much it smelled because pubic hair stuck to the inside of their cheeks and they were horny for innovation. They listened to all the flirtations that followed as if that fakeout wasn't supposed to lead them to believe everything he said was a sweet nothing. He gave eyes to one front row attendee in particular who he locked in on with lightning struck throbbing heart or trembling feet damn near daring to go cold or both, it was not obvious how his ocular fixation developed so suddenly. The next few minutes of the speech, as told by body language, was directed to this one arbitrary individual. The CEO stood completely still and stared them down as they started to avoid looking back and rubbed themselves out of not being sure how to handle the situation without causing a scene. The CEO didn't know how to exist in society without making things awkward. He'd failed the public speaking class he'd dropped out of during his formal, so called formative,

education, no substitute to the street knowledge he learned around water coolers from people on two weeks' notices. But his inadequate stage presence and delivery as an orator seemed not to diminish his legendary reception. His was a case exemplifying that perfection comes second place to the right attitude and a can do spirit. At one point, he read verbatim off the slide but they were still paying their full attention, engaged even without tomatoes. It was a sort of careless cool he manifested that made him admirable. Like a reformed hoarder, he threw away all sorts of things for which he just couldn't be bothered, cognizance toward recognizing the people who actually did the work dumped out with other men's treasures. The time allocated to covering the second half of the material that professional writers dedicated overtime weeks in the boardroom to drafting up and dividing out as bullet points was spent less on fulfilling contract and discussing the content of their painstakingly massaged keynote copy as it was watching the CEO mutter amplified comments into his cheek mic with real time decisions about what was skippable. According to his judgments, most of it was. The presentation deck ran out abruptly as populated frames flashed by, a finger spamming the right arrow, a train of wartime refugees headed the wrong way on the tracks. They would never be seen again. The CEO shrugged and figured that was it. He concluded prematurely and the audience gave him a standing ovation that interrupted and overpowered his delayed delivery of a few important endnotes related to the details of the technology that were glossed over in the main presentation. But they just wouldn't hear it. The applause was deafening and nobody present was not

clapping. Some sat back down just so they could stand up again. The reception was unprecedented. A little bit peeved that he got cut off just as he was about to inform them of early teleportation's most significant caveats, the CEO eventually gave into the endless celebration that was just a bunch of noise. In the sound field of the external world at least, this was all meaningless. But at that moment, in the third person minds of the people who were there, it felt like future history would goddamn this audience, lucky bastards. They optimized about what all this meant for Townname, for the CEO, for themselves as consumers, for human consciousness at large and the cognitive predicates of interior design, for the nation. America seemed redeemed. Maybe global warming wasn't gonna be so bad. An orator concluded, the man of the hour bowed adieu and walked behind a black, black curtain. Like the last moments of ablebodied living before a life-altering car crash, the people in that room would later be held to remembering back details of the CEO they hadn't paid attention to because they thought his face would be plastered all over the newsmedia and, besides, the saying is live everyday like it's your last, not his last. But he would never be seen again by the public except as a distant figure on the White House lawn, like a faceless child in a dream who is playing too far away from the dreamer to bear a face. He didn't disappear unless according to conspiracy theory, but that clue constellation babble pinned down the wrong and fake truth. Reality was more mysterious, a smokeless smokescreen. The CEO's only vital signs were occasional tweets and press statements, mere words on background, that updated the reading masses about future updates. "Progress is being made.

Updates to come." The social media literate public, most of whom read in keyword skim and whose eyes have evolved backwards into disintegral binocular channels so they can watch two separate unsynced GIFs at once, these notified intelligentsia held out hope despite the pessimism drilled into them by infinite scrolls which, far down enough, gave way to carousel image posts from accounts run by actual militias becoming next door neighbors with campaign announcements by former teen sitcom stars who ate raw organs on camera as a publicity magnet. Even in the wild west that was the outlaw jungle of an appified WWW, this budding generation of thought and endeavor kept a thumb on the news column and woed their losses and celebrated their wins. They pledged their atheistic faith to the coming manifestation of zero second travel between two spots separated in physical space. Fingers remained crossed despite getting stood up on the first date. Masturbation fantasies were at least good enough to reach the semblance of an orgasm. They believed in a transhumanist future where cyborgs rule and distance is just a fun fact. They held tightly the truth toy that was handed to them twisted. Waiting on satisfaction, fun was bound to come eventually. Until a postGED gap year with a Wikipedia repertoire on the subject of quantum physics posted a vertical video debunkment that tore apart the nonexistent feasibility of teleportation and literally began the end of the Teleport CEO's career. The hype train derailed off a bridge, dropping its passengers into the bitter current underneath. Everyone switched sides. A slew of social media challenges threatened viral defamation and outrage. Fake teenage girls pledged to commit suicide if teleportation was not publicly

available in thirty days, making a slit across their wrists for each uneventful day elapsed in this cruel advent. Abortion and gun control advocates took a moment of silence, broke character, and joined the snapping applause for the latest slam poem. Even the most outwardly composed woke liberal public personalities secretly want to externalize the pain they feel inside. The invisible tortures the visible. The whole world writhed in the wake of an endless feeling that ended. And there's a board of directors somewhere discussing the whole blowup abstractly, like producers for a PSA music video about poverty. "I know it's been a rough semester, but we can bounce back from this. Our prediction software has consistently forecasted better than breakeven profits in Q3." Bitchers and moaners dissent from this optimistic view with herd mentality fearmongering about whether the product can execute successfully enough to catch that quick rebound. Would the consumer public ever trust a company that misses deadlines? Or one that lies about what their engineering department really does? The whole room is oddly neither this or that about the implications of the technology at the center of their revenue stream being proved impossible. They consider conflicting methods of violating the golden rule in overlapping dialogue bubbles, the kind that would necessitate side by side speech blocks in a screenplay for the purpose of accurately portraying a realistic argument. But they all agree to disregard the emotional punch that shockwaved through the reactionary crowd, the everybody crowd, the world population each of whose members had an opinion on the drama. Was the team at Teleport actually this unethical? Don't believe it. The video was obviously parody but a

cohort of various oldheads with unwieldy sway in today's mass media landscape decided to circulate clips from the sketch as purported whistleblower knowledge caught on hidden camera. Controversies surrounding the pro bono intent of Teleport as a privatized but essentially public institution only increased following yet another scandal. Scandal after scandal after scandal. Apparently, employees of the company who attempted to quit during this vulnerable time were held at gunpoint by the CEO himself and begged to stay. Nobody really had a clue what kind of guy the man up top actually was. It seemed he'd gone into hiding, but his zipped lipped hibernation's awakening was in the works. Like the notorious celebrity he was, he planned to come out with the support of a really famous friend, POTUS in his case. The president was scripted by his advisors to agree with the CEO that a barrage of unforeseen legal obstacles and regulatory bureaucratic headaches had delayed the release of teleportation to the consumer public. The meeting would be livestreamed (audio only) on various websites with the optimism that this stilted dialogue between two powerful men with no foothold in the lives of the general populace would make a difference, reverse the raging tide, and revitalize the enthusiasm fans and detractors once had for a revolutionary product making dreams as ancient as civilization come true. The CEO planned to assure the nationwide mob falling asleep every night with the thoughts of his death that this project was not a false promise. Even just rehearsing his part of the duet, he knew patience would bring the utopia America always dreamt about, another germ to spread worldwide and conquer. But that manifestation of humanity's next

tech empire was a lost cause. Much like the tectonic plates that broke up cartoonish Pangea. It's a classic Greek tragedy. The public should've been distracted by a new trend by now. Anyone else could've been assassinated and their eyes would be taken off Teleport while the crew behind the scenes worked their asses to ensure local ordinances in initial teleportation station locations would be followed down to the letter, every guideline strictly observed. But the target on the back of the CEO's head had already been paid for. The client would remain anonymous. A couple inches of copper alloy was scheduled to destroy a man, taking down more victims in the months to come like a chain of dominoes falling at staggered intervals. The morning of, the CEO exited a black limo in the White House driveway, one of the safest places on Earth. This is where the president sleeps. The day's meeting, he anticipated, was gonna be like a sleepover except not at night and both parties would be awake the whole time. The CEO rung the doorbell and knocked on the knocker a few times too, for good measure. When the president answered with a cheesy smile, arms wide open, surprised like an old friend had randomly shown up on his porch, both just standing there in the exposed doorway, the CEO dropped silently. It would take forensic investigators a hot second, but they eventually ruled out homicide. What else could it have been? The president didn't believe them and his opinion didn't matter, despite being the president. The case closed as the trail went subzero and no other probable causes of death could be determined. Cheers resounded upon announcement that the end of a man's life would forever remain unresolved. The grieving minority who still supported this

mogul would never receive closure or be brought peace. The heir to the throne wept pretended sympathies on their behalf, a chronically careless bitch face hidden behind a kleenex veil, pledging to honor the memory of an ideasman by actualizing the dreams he pissed out as mere marketing tactics, always intended to be unachievable. The vicariously bereaved showed up in spades to a firelight vigil held by the family in the rain. Bundles of scrapwood flumed off a bonfire threatened by storm clouds overhead while bunches of strangers from god knows where circled around and mourned for the forever flaccid hard-on they used to ride. A camera crew livetaped CEO Jr.'s eulogy speech, which was one intelligible word followed by a leaky pipe, its creak a blue note so sad but so necessary to express the loss we feel. The daughter of the CEO, a midlife spinster only child who carried herself like a strong female protagonist showing that perfumed makeup and muscled biceps on broad shoulders can coexist, in actuality didn't care emotionally that her father died. But the television broadcasts and the selected clips cut out of them that would be syndicated in 9:16 vertical crop on social media needed to glow through the screen with class act heartstring puppeteering if the masses were to be convinced that Teleport was not a hoax. Rest assured, what the company did was very real, but it was just different now. Teleport changed industries like someone whose gender slowly switches over the course of years without them even trying to or realizing until one day they look in the mirror and. The CEO's daughter was transgender when it came to inheriting her father's company and turning it into a damage control PR firm whose only client was itself. This rebrand meant that some workers

could be classified unessential now. The STEM degrees were let go by their cushy tech jobs while the English majors stayed on to write apology copy catered to the press. There was nobody left that knew how the technology their employer was prepared to patent actually worked. The rejects were all forced to sign NDAs on the way out, using the lid of the banker's boxes they carried as a kind of clipboard, the tears of being laid off from a dream come true come false still wet on their cheeks and dripping on the paper and counteracting the quick dry properties of the special pens the office stocked. All this was gone. One cohort of employees from a particularly niche department whose work was beyond science pledged never to use a computer again. But not one of them would live to find out if the others actually held that word because, that night, when the CAD monkeys went out for jobless drinks at the unemployed bar, they ended up being victims of the next mass shooting. The only victims. It was suspicious. Not just one lone, an entire gang of gunmen had perpetrated the unexpected act and plead guilty in exchange for staying anonymous by not having a public trial or ever being known by name in the general public. They were incarcerated in separate prisons for safety reasons. Because of this violent and threatening development, it was decided against the wills of the survivors who didn't go to the bar that they'd all be enrolled in the witness protection program. A diaspora of groundbreaking discovery was cast like die upon a game board in the shape of the contiguous United States. The men who would have made the instantaneous trains run on time were lifted out of the

families that they had temporarily waysided in hopes of retiring by 30 with a big enough paycheck for three generations' blood, promising mates and offspring they'd come back one day and never leave again forever. Life made them all traitors to their word. One such engineer was former Johnny Euramathaca, a Reels addict who got shipped out to a 615 studio apartment away from his two story home, one story for each child he abandoned, plus his wife who depended on him financially. Sitting in an absolutely dead leasing office, decorated with knives on the walls and dull colored furniture, the widower whose spouse still lived hesitated and shivered as he signed a contract for the first time an unmarried man with a name he didn't really wanna use. "Not Johnny." The agent flipped the document to review it and squinted because what he saw made him doubt his optometrist's annual good news, a cover for what festered underneath the lid, a lie so awful it's just a joke poorly timed. He dispelled scratches from his throat and burrowed the laughing fit he was fixing to have the next time he caught himself alone. "This, uh, your first name is Not?" Not Johnny nodded like a broken neck survivor with a long road of recovery ahead whose compulsion for saying yes was gonna hinder the healing process. This enigmatic proper noun he'd been bestowed, it was something he was gonna have to accept. Another lesson to be learned. New ideology spreads by indoctrination. Get with the program. But he didn't have the credits to graduate to that advanced a level yet, or move beyond pillars of foundational knowledge, there were some basic life skills for which he was gonna have to swallow the truth pill. He'd never been laid off before, falsely secure in the now trespassed safety of

what was supposed to be the next big to thing them all, so he took none of the usual precautions a community college associate would in jobseeking the unskilled labor market. A sign spinner was advertising his own replacement at a local spice chicken franchise in Lebanon. Not Johnny decided to go in and ask for an application, standing in line behind a bunch of mobile orders waiting to verify their identity because the open access pickup shelf in the lobby system proved prone to theft during the business' lifetime worst fiscal semester, negative profits way deep end sunk. When it was Not Johnny's turn, he got hired on the spot without an interview or background check. Apparently, asking for an application was the application. He joined the delivery fleet taking orders to customers all over the country seemingly without bound. Lee was in Maine, Jeffrey was in Naples, Gabriel in Douglas County. The trunk of the company sedan provided to drivers was heated by coils installed dangerously close to the exhaust, so overnight transit times didn't bother customer satisfaction ratings even if employee experience died in the gutters. Not Johnny started immediately despite the fact that he didn't indicate his availability because there was nowhere on the application to indicate his availability because there was no application. Six mama wings, large Nashville fry, golden BBQ ranch butter sauce, and a medium diet. The works. His first customer resided northwest just across the border in a small town in Purchase, Kentucky that was not on the maps. He had to approximate it. His first class orienteering knowhow from scouts lacked application here because he had forgotten it, just like everything else he'd been taught at one point in his life. The

cognitive load he bore daily was already heavy enough given the new script he rehearsed constantly in his head, afterschool theatre class tips incomprehensible to the point of being no help, natural acting not much of a natural talent after all. The teacher's mantra: Remember to forget. Terrible secrets settled like dregs at the bottom of Not Johnny's mind, a kidney stone he would never pass. He backseated the rollercoaster in his mind so he could adapt and make peace with the pain instead. The predicament of his situation was a real stumper. He considered it from the outside. It's weird being under an NDA because like who does that. Forget about everything. But who can forget the night a routine traffic stop turned into a cadre of fed pigs fucking you from three different angles. He chose to remember because he wanted to remember and, for this decision, he would never quite heal from the damage. He missed his daughter who was also his wife who was also his son. The old family merged into one in his memory, a past life. But his son stood out most of all. He fondly regretted not being able to go out to another ball game with his son's little league, the Jaguars, and sit on the bleachers scrolling Instagram algorithm slop from teenagers and college students who he'd never seen before that entertained him and made him laugh out loud to which he'd instinctively wave his nonphone hand around in the air without looking away and apologize to the other Jaguar parents who were watching sternly as their kids got fucked by rival elementary schools and grew so annoyed they moved Johnny to the opposing team's stands where his presence was rather strategic and made the enemy morale melt. Even then, his son and his buddies and their wrongminded coach never won a game during

any season that his son was a part of the Jaguar roar. But Johnny didn't know that. He'd congratulate his boy on the big win every time and they'd all go out as a family, the others spending time together while he zombied around the pizza arcade on his screen, wandering mindless, stepping on little children as he watched a sixteen year old in a bonnet and airpods deconstruct translations of continental philosophy. The reminiscence of those peaceful easygoing days, a time before shit hit the fan so hard that unwiped splatter stains are still being discovered, was romantic and idealistic for him. Revisionist history erased the bad behavior he'd rather not admit to. His ignorance to decorous conduct as a father was his number two regret from his former life. His first one was that he did not notice the toxic positivity red flags of the greater Teleport workplace environment sooner, when it was still not too late and he could've saved himself by dropping out and avoiding the irreparable earthquake that shook up his world post assassination cum follow-up mass shooting. The zeroth regret was no regret at all. Regardless how many illusionary points in the past could have enjoyed better choices, he made it this far and he had an obligation to at least cruise content with it, even if that meant a concerning dose of mindless entertainment delivered by bizarre but not uncommon means. His days off were couch potato rot and a brain that closed up shop for the weekend. Some involuntary processes unplugged in the daze of drool and blink reducing refresh rate blue beacon glare, the television box alight with flashing images colorized to dry out the eyes, a whole twenty four hours spent like this, no sleep. The shadow government cover-up agency must've

compromised with the fiercely relentless demagogue news in running a major political story at three a.m. rather than any reasonable time when people would be awake. Not Johnny, arguably, was only a half exception. He did a good taxidermy impression catatonic on his living room couch when the breaking was broken and the Teleport tragedy ruined its satisfying resolution with a sequel that regurgitated many plotlines. The frozen viewer didn't seem to be breathing as his comatose body was illuminated by helicopter heat cam footage of an expansive modern one story floor plan with a lesbian lying face down next to some large potted plant. SWAT escorted the husk of an assassinated CEO's daughter to her shocking fate in a moment that was over nine hours old at the point it was aired, in secret, like a moonlight gang robbing hotspots in plain sight under the protection of a waning quarter crescent that keeps the fields dark. Not Johnny wore the first mask sculpted by an early apprentice, it evinced no emotion, and his gestures did not reveal him registering the segment as anything other than barren light and sound stimuli. The ironic flipside is that some superfans have been medically documented to attain this uncanny quantum of stillness and an uninitiated doctor might visit unannounced and claim this diagnosis but Not Johnny's corpse, seeming entranced in his show, was really just braindead outside of business hours. Even on shift, he lacked the rigorous cognitive horsepower required to pull serious forethought across the finish line of tasks he was given. Like laying low and avoiding the treacherous rural police camped out across the state line. Though it might get you there faster, speeding is a shortcoming if you can't even make it. The trooper who

pulled Not Johnny over looked like Norman Rockwell's Vietnam stud, silver reflecting aviator sunglasses licked tight the way envelope sealer is over a war hardened patriot face carved from erosion and torn like a new asshole. The first question that the man in khaki slapped the driver with was why he didn't stop sooner. Not Johnny clearly wasn't thinking clearly when he kept on straight while sirens and lights tailgated him from behind. He just tried to ignore it, there were more important things, he had a delivery ETA to uphold. Then a voice over a megaphone began taunting him. "OH JOHNNYYY." So his compliance was less out of fear than hope for a way to escape from the larger cop car chase he'd found himself in, ducking hastefully off the heat of the fed pigs who stripped away his identity. Truth be told, he was still scared shitless when the lawman unholstered his gun and flexed it like a knife bicep he'd spent all summer at the gym sharpening. "Open your trunk." This was Not Johnny's first time driving whatever make and model the delivery vehicle was so he began fumbling around in hard to reach corners out of sight from the officer. He groped under the steering wheel like he was gonna hotwire it so the badge just told him to stop. Some ordinance probably allowed this, or at least that's what Not Johnny rationalized when the policeman produced a crowbar from his patroller and forced open the trunk by breaking something Not Johnny was financially liable for. The trooper found the incriminating evidence he'd been seeking. Cardboard fast food containers were insulated in opaque black bags that had been laid neatly in precise positions atop a conduction coil. The packaging made it clear what this was. Nashville hot. The trooper didn't just

uphold code as an employee for the Tennessee government, he was a native statesman born and raised, so he took this one personal. But yoga was he and his domestic partner's latest hobby so he breathed back and straight to a healthy moral posture. Calmly. "Where you planning to travel, son?" An honest response murdered Buddha. "Nashville hot." Deep shapes of Nashville red hot flushed the steady interrogator's repressed visage. A hand on the shoulder guided Not Johnny out of his seat onto the road while the other hand accepted keys that were not offered to it. "NASHVILLE HOT. STAYS IN NASHVILLE." It was a long walk home. Not Johnny ambulated to the beat of precious unpaid seconds pouring away as he no-showed shifts against his deepest desires. He anticipated their excitement when he returned. Upon clocking in two days later, the hot chicken manager angrily grabbed the timecard from Not Johnny's delicate fingers and clocked him back out. "You're fired!" The overstimulation of this infuriating retort forced the allotypical bullseye to mutter and storm out. Darts were always flying his way. A voice teased from behind, singing mockery, he was not welcome back. The hand that was too eager to lock the door forgot closing wasn't for another four hours, but its narcissism entailed an apathy that DGAF'd customers trying the handle once and giving up after one attempt and going somewhere else. A non-diehard's business is a nonstarter. Shoppers of adjacent strip mall vendors must've assumed Not Johnny just that eager when they saw him fully leaning back tug of war style against the unforgiving entrance while a manchild on the other side posted the stop gesture with his left hand and thrusted spitty foul remarks from his crooked maniac grin and his right hand adjusted the brim

of his capless visor, looking like an arrogant bitch. The whole ordeal could've been recorded and uploaded on the local highschool fight clips channel, garnering thousands in views, yet it takes a certain amount of injustice to push someone to this low. Teenagers will never understand, until their age loses its suffix, that anal may be easy for them but adults have taken it up the ass way too long to embrace strange novelties when they know they don't enjoy them. All this to say, Not Johnny reached a point of desperation where the graphite snaps because the wood has splintered away and thinned too brittle. The associate shift leader, reveling behind the glass of his inherited kingdom, rattled car keys like a baby toy or a needy housekitten's plaything. The cat may be deaf, but he likes what he can see. Not Johnny entertained legal recourse if he couldn't repossess his item. "I'm gonna dial NINE... ONE... ONE...!" The intermittent silences were a bit dramatic for the situation. Mobile app couriers were now circled around gooning on Shorts to comatize the grueling seconds between now and when the lobby would be finally opened, this immature skirmish cut off early by the presence of wagies affiliated with the big dogs. Small business killing sinners shuffled inside while one last interaction fulfilled its necessary awkwardnesses, the uneasiness that comes from trying to goof about a severe interpersonal incident too soon. The uniformed tease tossed empty before underhanding an actual which threw Not Johnny off, a fakeout that fooled him onto his knees ready to catch, prepared in the position where palms fail and live balls miss goalies guarding second base while the femoral stretch from third to home sits wide open. The airborne keys were on their way in a bad way.

The umpire said it would be Not Johnny's fault if anything cracked when things hit the ground. Running. Not Johnny, a feral child, scurried onto his feet as he scooped up his shit off the floor and scampered away, car doors shut frantically so they can be locked quickly, he icepicked and screwdrivered the ignition, stomped down the gas, and as he hightailed his steel horse he threw a middle finger out his rear windshield in the shape of a peace sign as his postironic method of saying goodbye. Happy lifers have no time to blame, to hate and hold grudges, the rest will visit every corner of a maze while these humble folk pay no mind and find better ways to go on about their day. Like pulling all nighters. 72 consecutive hours followed the burial of Not Johnny's hatchet. He sat on the fresh, loose graveyard dirt in some kinda trance state during which he forgot upon which ground he reposed. He forgot to feed himself because the TV life support of the couch was like a hospital bed with an IV stand. Everything humans need can fit in a little clear box. Or a moving image bursting to life from an inanimate screen. Adam Sandler marathon, the vivacity, bring Not Johnny back to his spirits. No, no alcohol, this man needs some water. He was wheezing, dry mouth breathing, so he reluctantly rose and left lotus pose behind, his om transferring from mouth to fridge as he came up on the humdrum appliance. In profile view, the arctic blue glow spilling out onto Not Johnny's scraggly goatee premonition cast his dark days doomer aesthetic into a new light. The shelves were empty. And as much as a fella festers to choose that kind of want, the trace estrogen circulating around Not Johnny's body knew the better of a life led by male stoic mood boards. It looked like he was taking a trip

to the supermarket, no matter how sore his face would ache from cringing afterwards. He pantomime peptalked himself in the vanity of his sun visor while the tank continued gurgling gas, his AC kicking up a mean wind. Funny face number one: Not Johnny blew air into his cheeks like a chipmunk and slapped them limp. A few more of these and his psyche started to smell flowers even as the chronic satanic bleakness of permanent loss loomed over that fragrant garden like an eternally imminent thundercloud. He promised himself that he'd get out and leave once this song finished, for a few songs, then the playlist ended and he'd drained five dollars fuel. Orange teased behind sky's skin, darkened with a tan from being out in the sun all day. Now, the sun was packing its things. It was ready to go away. Just for one night. An evening rush of regularly scheduled office personnel fresh off work enjoyed their international traveller friend's presence while it lasted. Not Johnny decided to join them, finally. As he stepped out of his car, his world rendered a snowglobe of sensory precipitation. A Salvation Army sash stood by the storefront ringing a bell and swinging a pail. A lost soul called out "Joan?" like a parent without her child, ready to get mad at it but mostly unsure and confused, insecure, lonely. Not Johnny began what would become the longest walk he'd walked without a phone in hand connected on bluetooth since his first child was born while he ignored his laboring wife and watched some chud unwrap TCG on live. It was a disappointing pull. Now, Instagram only reminded him of when he had a life and a family. He rawdogged reality but maybe he should've at least put those airpods in as stranger repellent. The searching woman's voice drew closer. "John?"

A split second of white knuckled readiness for wartime trauma subsided to the ego death reassurance that it was all a coincidence. He waved it away, but she must've thought his hand looked like a hello. "Johnny?" He fastened his pace across the pedestrian crosswalk stripes and into the produce portico afore the entrance. He plateau'd ambulation rate at speeds comfortable for a slow car as he passed the hopeless crates closest towards the door yet most ignored. The rotten fruit filling those crates had been picked over by flies and reeked like the death of a dead body and its mere sight needed a graphic content warning badly. Who's gonna buy that unshoppable merchandise? The whole eyesore business only served to ward off customers. Not Johnny just wanted to get some groceries. His stomach was a plastic bag. His digestive tract was disposable, thrown out like last week's trash. He longed to unsee what he never agreed to seeing. His daily suffering resembled mind parkour and this was just another setback. The world was full of setbacks. One such setback followed Not Johnny from behind as he loaded screenlessly into the next stage where an AI that had spawned in in the previous room was programmed to kill specifically him. His first guess was to take off the brakes and bodyslam full force into a small endcap of glassed applesauce but that just ended in some eyes from nearby strangers shooting clumsy allegations. Not Johnny rubbed the shoulder that was gonna bruise as he resumed drag racing speedometer readings on his feet and lapped also his mind around the thought that if he couldn't glitch through walls, his op couldn't either. Difficulty level was now easy, at least as he perceived it. "Johnny!" But the high stakes of the moment

didn't call for such safe thoughts. Polo dipped into the prebuilt sanctuary of a past prepper's toilet paper fort, hiding amongst the shelves with silenced breaths while Marco wrinkled her stern brow and looked serious, running around aimlessly, committing horseplay in the adult world where that wasn't allowed. Luckily, the employee was apathetic. High horse grownups who hated fun took offense as the distressed target experienced a claustrophobic panic attack minisode inside his confined quarters and fled for the back of the store where the employee denied him access to the employees only area and the rear emergency exit therein, which itself was apparently employees only too. Spontaneously borrowing backup plans from puzzles whose rules didn't apply here, Not Johnny followed the wall until, from the other end of the main aisle between the aisles, his seeker regained visual on him. He was none the wiser to being watched. It's moments like this where the bird's eye bystander who knows too much realizes how concerning it is that we are this oblivious to our own surveillance. The human body has not caught up to the activities its own physiology makes possible. Modern world didn't teach evolution jack bull. Ms. Stalker made a steady beeline for Not Johnny at a normal pace which he wouldn't notice from the back of his head as he pretended to be checking out the deli case. A random shopper in all black left behind his compact cart full of children's cookware to assist in the chase. He silently nodded to the woman on a mission, who didn't know he was, as he tried to signal to her that the next move was a flank operation. He sped up and wrapped around trying to corner Not Johnny in the milk section as the woman continued straight ahead, ignoring

directives. But Not Johnny was now maneuvering himself through a particularly congested aisle, excusing himself as he squeezed past families who exhibited pack behavior. The man rendezvous'd with the woman at the head of the aisle as they watched his back making slow progress midway down to the other end. "You need help with this?" The woman dismissed her unsolicited aide and made a solo effort through the crowds, ruthlessly pushing grocery cart kids' legs against sharp edges of shelves and dividing blood relations like a parted sea as she shouted "JOHNNY" and "PERDONAS." Once both seeker and seekee freed themselves of those regrettable, overcrowded breeding grounds, the similitude of their alike minds led the latter into a poorly timed coincidence. Not Johnny had exposed himself in the toy section where his foe found him once again. "John?" A foam sword duel proved fruitless because one side, refusing to arm, shoved over an insurance table folded out with pamphlets, spineless turrets standing on either side ready to recite their rehearsed spiel. Evading, evading. The pursuer never caught sight of the fugitive for more than a few seconds at a time because the chase lasted minutes, building to a climax near the exit at the end of checkout. She was almost catching up to him, his eyes roved around that bobblehead of his. He was looking for anything. Flustered. He'd never been asked out before. Was this being asked out? He stole the empty shopping cart of a bored nonagenarian who'd been in the store way too long. He turned it around furiously as the monster from the parking lot sprinted at him with a frozen sourdough baguette. "WHAT THE HELL IS HAPPENING?" He pushed the shopping cart into a wine display in the cheese section and ran

one eighty as the hundred fell behind him, crashing valiantly with purple hearts while an imaginary grocery store vintner played small violins off to the side. The fugitive, both in name and in deed, turned back only once as he swooped out the automatic sliding doors already activated by another exiting shopper. In the escaping distance, the broken glass tangle looked like the aftermath of a blood feud. Normandy. And like a true Vietnam warrior returning home from the trenches, he was shellshocked. He didn't even want to step foot in that lonely apartment again. He turned the key in the ignition. He was going to visit home. He rode out just before sunset from the parking lot where the reaper tried to grab him and as he was leaving he saw the dimmed city on the horizon behind him, a fadeout framed in widescreen by his rearview mirror which was also a telephoto lens, watching margherita pizza cheese clouds slip and advance the dusk into its darker heir. This night drive was gonna take nine hours if he didn't stop, and he wasn't planning to. No music, no podcast. He was Rivers Cuomo for the postsex age. He chose an ascetic path in the wake of his grief, rather than fall into yet another trap of mindless distraction consuming his attention span. He consumed nothing. He created the content he lived. An original thinker. His thoughts were how fucked he currently was in the big picture of his younger self. A meaningful career? Gone. Family? The band never got back together after what was supposed to be a temporary breakup. He wished he still had those tapes so he could listen to them now, driving back to the middle of nowhere Midwest where it all went down. Just fingering a bass again would unlock memories deeper than drowsy redeyed throwbacks, falling

asleep at the wheel in highly illegal micronaps, not remembering if he even played bass or not. Life is but a dream. Weezer? The soundtrack. He blasted Pinkerton on repeat to keep himself awake as he slouched the flat plains of vacant Missouri. Anyone who chose to live here was a miserable person. "We're miseryians, we live in misery." His first impression of the state as an imaginative boy with a listening problem was the exact atavistic cud he chewed on years later. The moon in the dome above was double what it was back then. Cars on the road at this hour drove side by side with their identical twin ghosts. Not Johnny's sober eyes drunk sleeplessness wet and he cried for his childhood at empty intersections that looked like stopped brake bumpers all lit up. He couldn't tell the difference. He ran them either way. Back on the interstate, his scenic outlook was a subluminous vacuum where positive integers extended less than zero. The strokes were impressionist. Black on black. How profound. The Mother of the West, the Mother of Humanity. Alternative lineages of mankind with no evidence to back them up might posit that this land actually gestated the white race while Africa concocted all other colored peoples in parallel. Pamphlets in the truck restroom said more about this. But maybe it wasn't racism or problematic phrenology or supremacists and separatist freedom fighters, maybe it was just boredom. There was nothing to do in this state, Not Johnny pondered. The highway overcame a low bar to cherish the title of most amusing activity in all of Missouri. Anyone who lived here was essentially an empty person. Even one night of temporary stay might cause someone permanent brain damage. We all do what we have to do, brunting

the risks of vegetation in order to prevent inciting conflicts with our fellow automobile operators. Share the road. In the end, Not Johnny did the right thing. He woke in the morning, sun already fully up, next to an abandoned warehouse with no other vehicles parked outside and a disturbing industrial hum emitting from behind the closed barn doors at the front of the structure. The entrance began slowly sliding open and apart like curtains as if here stood the unsuspecting military hanger where classified air force technology was being developed and this was the reveal sequence in a blockbuster about dogfights of World War III. The weeds growing through the pavement did look promisingly manicured, but Not Johnny booked it before he could find out what would've happened to him if he stayed. The older you get, the less curious you are. It wasn't even a passing fancy for him to speculate what went down back there. The event didn't strike him as noteworthy, as an event at all. The only thing his age wanted for him was a reunion with a life that was continuing on under some unnecessary pretense that he didn't exist. His senses felt back to normal when he turned down his street for the first time in weeks, what could've been written off by neighbors as just some businessman's trip with major local flight delays or a solo soul search vacation that constituted time away from the family per therapist mandate. The mailboxes slugged by like molasses because he knew when he got there, he would wish he cherished the anticipation of the wait a little longer, since you can only be reunited with your family once after getting involuntarily placed into the witness protection program, unless you're just really unlucky. The landmarks told him he was close, drawing nearer and

nearer to the surprise party they were gonna throw for him that was not a surprise party since he already predicted it but life's fun anyway come what spoilers may, so he shut his eyes as he exited onto a curb whose distance he miscalculated and tripped over but the blood was just a cave painting which depicted his struggles, a mnemonic for when he'd recount what he went through on the couch. He didn't wanna look yet. What's a little delayed satisfaction? Okay. He had arrived at his old house, yes this was where he'd started a life with a woman he met when she was in highschool, but some redlettering had been staked into the empty driveway. "JUST LISTED." No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no.... This must've been incorrect. A prank or something. Yhwh's cruel curse. Was the number right? He shook his head and caressed the ornamental handle on the garage door and moaned in lieu of real tears because he was too high on his testosterone game to shed pride and cry about it. But raindrops fell anyway. His throat was a jammed apple expanding and hurting. He yanked on the garage handle spasmically, convulsions synchronized to the sinusoidal volume fluctuation of his tear duct flow as he broke down and broke it down, his cyclic sobs like an underground trap remix. All this pulling yanked his lightbulb. What if... What if, instead of... What if he squatted in his own home? Not Johnny yearned to return to when his name wasn't a negation of itself. He picked himself up off his knees and, imbalanced from the static rush of standing up too fast, fell forward and caught himself like a drunken zombie in a frantic hurry towards his backyard basement hatch. He crawled inside just in time, barely making it. Beneath the floorboards where he spent

many mornings microwaving white bread and putting some butter on it and dipping it in low fat milk and calling that breakfast, right below the wooden panels across which he tried to tap dance in socks and slipped and fell but walked off the concussion fine enough because his daughter was watching in the periphery of her tablet, this is where he'd coop up crazy mode living under a rock like a hermit or an old man flipping through photobooks and becoming absorbed in the shadow of his former self. Ah, how good it feels to return to somewhere familiar. The truth was that he'd spent so little time down here previously that it troubled him considerably to find the switch. It was his wife's duty, back when he had a wife, to man the breaker during outages because he was too scared, one big scaredy cat, very scared of the dark. Now, only in a time of prodigal return, did he realize all the open real estate he never utilized that had been six feet under where he slept the whole time. When they bought the house, he had paid for something he wasn't gonna use but now he would use it. This odd room was all he could use. The door upstairs was locked from the other side and he wasn't about to break in. He kept the lights on perpetually to fend off demons, perhaps the haunts that lingered from a homicide scene, settling down and starting a family done so poorly its results were comparable to serial killer gore. Living in luxury for the remainder of the bill cycle gave Not Johnny's sheltered ass false impressions that it would always be this way. Then everything went black and he went crazy. Biology. Loneliness may convince even the well adjusted monkey to engage in dastardly pastimes. A few days of darkened underground dwelling had fully converted Not Johnny into just this

type of beast. He sacrificed a battery bank he found lying around to go full ape. A primate with a personal computer and mobile phone hotspot internet access. His power extended into infinite monkeys overkill, part two, an upgrade of the original thought experiment. The typist was a righteously selfish individual whose current worldview revolved around having been wronged by the government. He craved to ruin another person's American dream because his own American dream had been ruined. The perfect future he used to envision for him and his 1950s family was never coming back. He schemed a prank where, by the end of it, he would be the only one laughing. He set up night vision GoPros in the Townname cemetery and hired graverobbers. He bought potato chips from a discount convenience store and reclined in an office chair for a laid back night in which he awaited satisfaction. Live black and white video feed a couple good hikes across town streamed to his screen. You'd expect to detect faint sprites floating around but the moonlit hillside rested empty and still. Until... until two hooded figures in ripped jeans entered the frame from behind a tree branch which obscured a patch of ground that they began shoveling. It was the tomb of the CEO to whom Not Johnny traced the beginning of his troubles. But he didn't blame the innocent who had no posthumous say in Not Johnny's undoing. Not Johnny had no desire to steal a body. Or watch one get stolen. He watched for good timing's sake. He tapped three times on his mobile phone touchscreen in rapid succession like he had thought about it and decided to replay denying Jesus on fast forward. He lowkey kinda wanted to though. Everyone around him was a vain baddie who

gassed themselves up for real. The dispatcher wrote herself a five star Yelp review given how prompt her service was. The response urgency was escalated when she found out the target of the graverobbing. A cruiser snuck up on the scene immediately, a twofer aboard, the braver one advancing towards the suspect duo in FPS crouch. Some squeaker on VC was being really fucking annoying so Not Johnny muted the tinny mic feed and zoned in on just what his eyes could see. Gun in hand, the stealth approach turned loud when the engaging officer appeared to stand up and shout. No reaction time however, the enemy fired the first round and the fed pig, who actually only had county level jurisdiction, dropped on his back like this was a movie with really bad stunts or a video game death screen whose animators didn't know what they were doing. The graverobbers ignored the man they just killed and continued their mission while Not Johnny processed the ordeal mouth agape. That was not what he planned. He hoped to punk the diggers by getting them arrested with serious charges, definitely no body count involved, and this had zero place in the plan. Shoot, shoot, shoot. The graverobbers would shoot three more times when they exchanged bullets with the second, supporting cop and won lethally. They stuffed the body of the CEO along with the two dead deputies in their trunk and fled to a place far away where they would never be found. It's not just in crime novels. They lived out their lives on some fantasized tropical island where no one ever spent money because no one ever needed to. More importantly, nobody would find out what they did. They could just elect not to care about the guilt and the regrets because they loved freedom so much. Not

Johnny, on the other hand, had to record a B-side improvised. Find an alternative. He slept on it and woke up in the morning with a head full of dreams of an idea. Maybe just give himself up? He mailed an anonymous tip, self address writ large like the recipient would be dyslexic, to the post office and waited in anticipation for his confession to be answered with SWAT knocking down the door of the house he was squatting in, a place he no longer called home. But the wish that willed him through the rest of the day was ruined when his neighbor got the boot, the taser, the whole works, a handcuffed crime scene photo headlining the local news and a smile on his face just hours before he happily plead guilty before judge and jury. The innocence of a famewhore getting the surprise chance to slut cannot be understated. Not Johnny never expected the day to come where he'd feel so envious of another person's criminal mischievements but the tables were turning during this unfortunate hour on his life's clockface so he drove through tears to explain things right at the courthouse. It was too late. He broke down in front of a clerk whose lunch break was overdue. "I've been sick for a long time, and...." She couldn't do anything to help him so she tried the next best thing. She banned him from entering a government building without a handwritten note that said he was under the care of a licensed clinical psychiatrist. The begging bum outside on the steps paused as a sobbing Not Johnny walked by, bereft of yet another one of life's pleasures, looking into those tortured eyes and beyond them to the source of their pain and frowning a little bit when observing how impossible the situation of this upstanding citizen was, thrown out of the place where he went to perform his

civic duty. The muscles in the begging bum's face drooped at the weight then consciousness revived itself into the societal script we all must fulfill, even in the face of another's plight. "Got any spare change? Bruh." Not Johnny averted his head from any visible acknowledgement of this blight on society but the neurological minutemen knocking around in the executive suite envied the little guy starving in the streets. The elite guard up top had to face the ironic trappings of their financial liberties. No petty coin was gonna save them from the debts they owed and the problems they ended up stuck in. Running away promised no chance of hope, only the loss of familiar retail employees to call home, plus anything east of the Mississippi was doom territory with a double serving of deviled poultry. Not Johnny's resumé was a crash and burn tech startup like what else is new, and a fast food hustle that ended before it ever began on paper. That's it. No extracurriculars, no student organizations, no certifications. Two items with nothing but each other for company like end of times Adam and Eve but they're T4T aromantic asexuals who are infertile anyway so it was nice knowing you human race. This level of desperation. Understandably, Not Johnny threw the rat race. He tried to lie flat on his face and avoid the winds of an economy which wanted him to overdose broken credit materialism but he realized he'd either have to fracture his nose or breathe in all that noise. Fuck it. Still unemployed and not looking, Not Johnny let his GPS route him to a mom and pop arms dealer. He entered the door chime, wondering if this would be his final destination. It looked like heaven for the unreformed. Barren inside, devoid of fellow shoppers who might offer recommendations,

his only friends were ghosts. Like a martyr. Like a loser. He sulked amongst empty shelves in a place that seemed pillaged, pathetic shoulders drooping because he genuinely looked pathetic. This is the lowest of the low. A longhaired teenage boy with suppressed stubble appeared and Not Johnny's intrusive conscious entered him into his mind as someone who looks like someone who would be named Duchess. The anachronistic teen YOLO'd a nonchalant greeting stuck in time and tapped on the glass over which he was hovering from his post, drawing the only customer's desperate attention to the concealed carry display locked up and just begging for a kind stranger to post bail. It was innocent. It didn't do anything. But it could. "This bad baby is capable of shooting thirty lethal rounds in three seconds. You could take down a school with this thing." Not Johnny found the analogy weird, but liked the guy. He admired the luscious hair draping down over his buttocks. A fair maiden. And as was decorum for a lady, the patron waxed polite with his language, indirectly building up to the inquiry he came here to make. Small talk was traded like collectible playing cards, a blind box, life stories inside and violent tendencies. The young employee daydreamt out loud about past daydreams, manifestos for a cause, the grander causelessness that lies outside the bounds of mortality. He used to pretend to beat people up in middle school, beating himself hard in the chest to make believable sound effects. He got expelled for the illusion. And now he worked here, a down and out deadbeat hunting for an excuse to break out the merchandise in an emergency situation. "I'm basically waiting until absolutely nobody can blame me for dying." Not Johnny laid it on him, feeling the time

was right and that their sentiments had been drawn together within a ballpark from which mutual understanding might arise. "Which one's the best for committing suicide?" Duchess didn't hesitate with his response. "I'm gonna be honest, man, the best ones I've watched online all use something like this." He flashed something from the case, a golden pistol smudged with fingerprints that no one ever bothered to wipe off. He held it up in front of his face and rotated it like an artifact, for dramatic effect, ogling the booty as if he himself were the customer with eyes on the prize. Not Johnny didn't even have to hold it, not only because he wasn't offered a chance to, but because anything would work. The barely legal shop clerk checked him out, bid him goodnight, and he was walking back through the door chime when he turned around and continued a conversation already effectively terminated. "Could I have two actually?" So it was. Not Johnny carried two shiny, candy looking things in a lunch sack. He ended up in the police station later, without handcuffs, idling in a packed waiting room on a particularly busy night. Civilians were surveilled by half a dozen cops standing in the most awkward places. Not Johnny watched the receptionist behind the window make homelessness look bad then casually produced a golden handgun from his dark navy sweatpants, finger on the trigger pressed against his temple. "I'VE LOST EVERYTHING." Screams rallied around the room like balls hit back and forth with ping pong paddles across a tableless void. Protect and serve used their best judgment to wait and watch where this was going, hands barely over their holsters. One guy got a donut on his hot. "I'VE LOST IT ALL." One civilian made the rudest glare then walked out. This was some crazy mess

he was uninterested in. An adolescent drama. Not Johnny just sat there, eyes closed, seemingly on the verge as he grunted through a glued mouth. "I HAVE NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE." The audience watched in anticipation and fear, jubilation and doubt. They couldn't even afford to look at their popcorn, fingering blindly around in the bucket and spilling it all over the floor. Someone would have to clean this up. A good apple, adjusting his blue, badge adorned hat, oinked at this shit. "Put. It. Down." He felt momentarily satisfied when Not Johnny threw the weapon to the ground, successfully failing to set off an accidental discharge that no one expected. It seemed not even the cops remembered their gun safety basics. A white knight vigilante slid like he was coming in on an unmanned base, grabbing the live ball, and pointing it at Not Johnny's head from a few feet away, pulling the clicky and impotent trigger repeatedly. An actual officer, meanwhile, tried to charge the suicide danger and jump on him but fell through the trampoline of his savior complex as Not Johnny pulled out yet a second golden handgun, resuming the classic position where his arm was held up like that, his eyes clenched and teeth shut tight, bared through his open lips. A bystander was contemplating violent intervention actions but snubbed his egotrip rescue fantasy in a moment's consideration of his fellow passengers and the impact whatever he did might have on them because, selfless unto death though he be himself, the others in the room might not agree with the side effects of the imaginary disarmament chess prediction he'd played out in his mind. What's the next best thing for everyone? He wished he could orchestrate the extras around him like a conductor on stage at the world's fair.

Every country on Earth in attendance. But he was just one, one of the many silently scheming passengers, each believing themselves to be the only person hacking out possible safe moves to make, all aboard an airplane called police station interior. INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT Our protagonist has found himself in quite the conundrum with the second of two illegally concealed firearms he had on his person gripped against his temple. His incisors are jammed together and he appears to be attempting to drill down to the nucleus of the densest material in the known universe. EXT. GALAXY - DAY The cosmos churns as usual and the sun is shining indiscriminately. Sat on the floor, knees up, back against the wall, Not Johnny looked like an attack dog ready to pounce, if only on himself. "I'VE LOST IT ALL! I'VE LOST IT ALL! I'VE LOST IT! I'VE LOST IT! I'VE LOST IT!" The booth crowd watched this barstool freakshow afraid of drunkenness, thinking the perpetrator really couldn't hold his own. The bartender could tell the crazeball spitting insanities was down on his luck and poured him up something off tap into a thick beer glass, a chalice of the gods. It was unique, one of a kind, fine artisan drinkware from a retired generation of craftsmanship. The new makers didn't care, forging plastic china in the smithy of their playdoh sets. Not Johnny received his gift through supplicant lips like a flood which broke the water authority dam or a confluence of souls slurped into heaven during the whirlwind of rapture day checklist items. Drink to that. Check. Not Johnny reckoned his hands too dry to continue safely handling the glasswork without lubrication. But when he picked it back up after a fresh saliva handwash, the trophy entrusted to his grip slipped on by

through a moisturized tube of slickened palm skin. Short enough a fall, the thing didn't shatter completely into pieces when it dropped but a hairline crack the width of a fat slug inset a ravine along the cylindrical height of the Valhallic greatness. It would've been admirable as a birthmark or a battle scar gained in true combat but the damage had been dealt in peacetime by a low blower. Other stool sitters who sat along the bar rose from the seats and gathered around to onlook Not Johnny's fateful moment of assessment as he hoisted up some trash he picked off the floor. No, that's a priceless piece of art he just ruined. It could've been anything. Just some atoms stitched together. Not Johnny gave no reaction to what a law student could easily defend as manslaughter, not homicide, but the company of strangers who allowed him and his beer piece no space were gasping like gossip girls in a public restroom overtaken by powdered pillows and gossip girls. Head down and darkened orbits pictorialized the reckless center of attention as some sort of male model, a kind of model of maleness and machismo and what it means to be a man. Gay voice reacted to the accident predictably, meanwhile. "Oh my, oh. Oh my... sisterrr." The bartender hand dried a glass over a rubber mat then threw the towel back his shoulder and walked up to the outcry. He saw what were basically his childhood puppy's intestines strewn out by a drunk driver across the street he grew up on. Both his mom and his dad were ballgagged in a basement somewhere in the Caribbean. Even worse, company property was damaged by a customer at work. "Did you crack it?" It took all Not Johnny's willpower not to break right then, become like the acquaintances and jug whose hurt were in his hands, blind

sheepishly again the overtread trail of Newton's third. But science is real. The world does not have a hole in it. Secrecy sworn under oath rides against human nature and dangerous truths about what happened behind the closed Vegas doors of Teleport's R&D lab came trembling out good old Johnny Euramathaca's detransitioned drag queen's dress. He sighed. .... And then released. "We never really cracked it."